ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES SOLIDARITY ASSOCIATION

ARSA

2025

Vanished in Transit

A report on Missing Refugees

Preface

Every year, tens of thousands of refugees set out on their journeys with the hope of survival and reaching safety. Yet, many never return from these journeys or disappear without a trace. This report is an attempt to go beyond mere numbers, striving to make visible the human tragedy and the invisible suffering left behind. The loss of asylum seekers and refugees along forced migration routes is not only an individual tragedy but also a shared responsibility of the international community. For this reason, we are compelled to carry out data-driven research to honor the memory of those who are lost, to amplify the voices of the families they left behind, and to prevent similar losses in the future.

As the **Asylum Seekers and Refugees Solidarity Association (ARSA)**, in presenting this report, we aim to combine the realities on the ground with data from international organizations, to raise awareness on refugee rights, and to call on decision-makers to develop more humane and protective policies.

Each missing person represents a life, a hope, and a future. Therefore, we must regard their absence not merely as a statistic, but as a collective loss of our shared humanity.

Dr. Zakira Hekmat
Director
Asylum Seekers and Refugees Solidarity Association (ARSA)

Introduction

The data collection on missing refugees poses significant challenges, as the majority of cases are reported by family members to relevant organizations. Furthermore, a considerable proportion of missing refugees are likely to have perished during migration, rendering subsequent verification efforts particularly difficult. Consequently, the data presented in this report are exclusively compiled from publicly available sources provided by various official and international organizations.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) established the Missing Migrants Project in 2014 to systematically document migrant deaths and disappearances worldwide. As of 2025, the project has recorded more than 75,000 cases, although the true figure is likely far higher due to underreporting and the inaccessibility of many migration routes (IOM, 2025). These numbers demonstrate not only the human toll of irregular migration but also the inadequacies of current migration management systems.

Missing migrants are not merely victims of chance or “natural risks.” Their disappearances are deeply connected to structural issues in global governance, including restrictive border policies, insufficient legal migration pathways, and failures of international cooperation (Carling, 2017; Brian & Laczko, 2016). Policies that prioritize deterrence over protection often push migrants into more dangerous routes, increasing the likelihood of death or disappearance (Cusumano & Villa, 2021).

This phenomenon also raises profound human rights concerns. International human rights law recognizes the inherent dignity and the right to life of every individual (United Nations, 1948). The denial of information to families about the fate of their loved ones constitutes a violation of their right to know, as acknowledged by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 2016). Migrant deaths and disappearances thus represent not only a humanitarian tragedy but also a breach of binding legal obligations.

Introduction

This report seeks to contribute to the growing body of evidence and advocacy on missing migrants by:

1. Documenting the global scale of migrant deaths and disappearances through the most recent available data.
2. Presenting case studies that illustrate the diverse risks faced by migrants and the experiences of affected families.
3. Analyzing the human rights and legal frameworks that govern state obligations.
4. Identifying critical policy gaps and failures in migration governance.
5. Offering actionable policy recommendations, including the call for the recognition of an International Day of Remembrance for Missing and Deceased Migrants by the United Nations General Assembly.

By combining quantitative data, qualitative case studies, and legal analysis, this report aims to highlight both the urgency of the crisis and the pathways toward meaningful change.

Main Topics

GLOBAL DATA

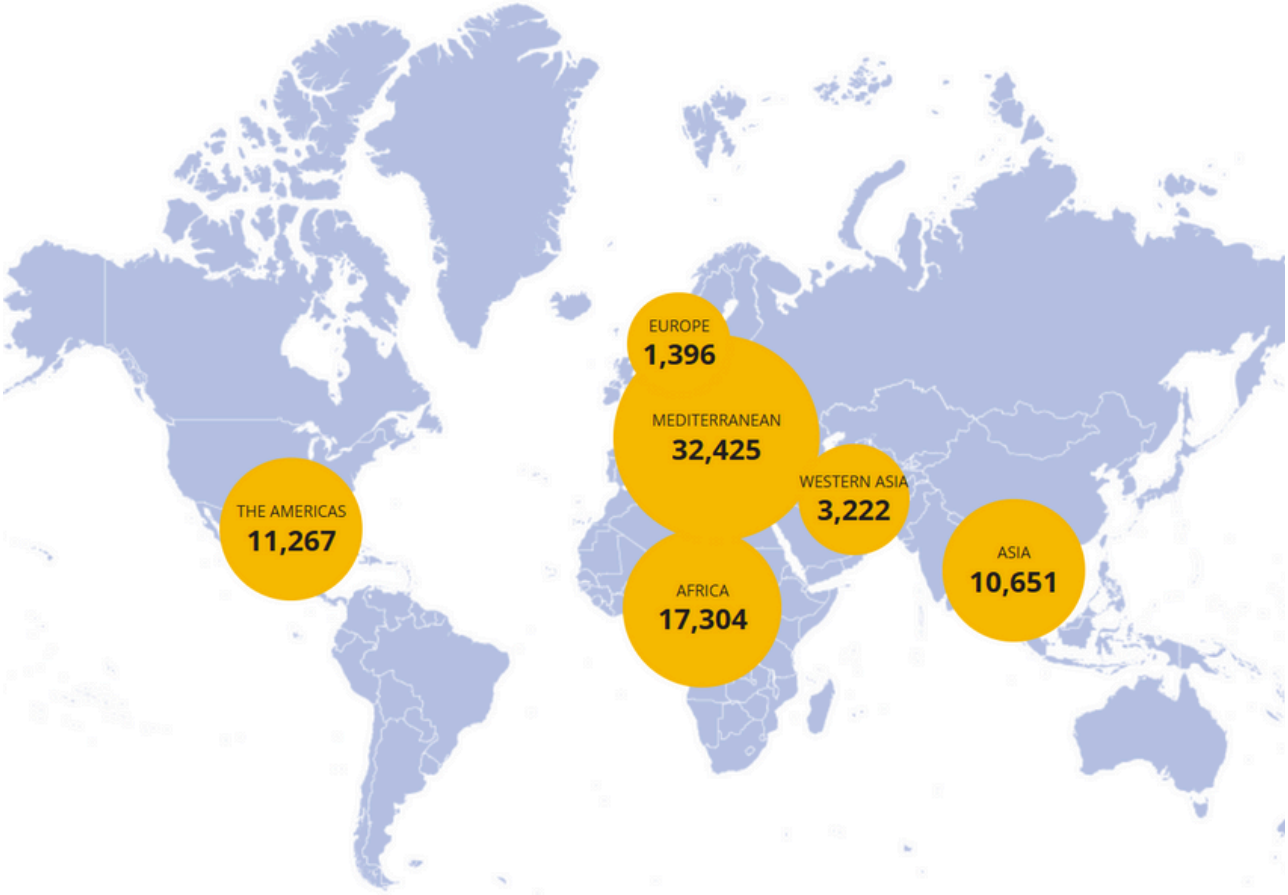
CASES AND CAUSATIONS

SOLUTIONS

Global Overview of Migrant Deaths and Disappearances

Number in Perspectives

Since 2014, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has systematically documented migrant deaths and disappearances through its Missing Migrants Project. As of early 2025, more than 75,000 cases have been recorded globally (IOM, 2025). This figure, while alarming, represents only a partial account. Many deaths occur in remote deserts, at sea, or in regions where monitoring is absent, meaning the actual number is likely far higher (Brian & Laczko, 2016).



Map of the number of missing refugees(Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.)

Global Overview of Migrant Deaths and Disappearances

Global Trends (2014–2025)

- **Mediterranean Sea:** At least 32,425 deaths and disappearances, making it the deadliest migration route in the world. The Central Mediterranean corridor between Libya and Italy accounts for nearly 25,000 of these cases (IOM, 2025).
- **Africa:** More than 17,300 cases, largely concentrated in the Sahara Desert. Many bodies are never recovered, leaving families without closure (McGregor, 2020).
- **America:** At least 11,267 deaths and disappearances, most occurring along the U.S.–Mexico border where heat exposure and drowning in the Rio Grande are frequent causes (HRW, 2022).
- **Asia:** Over 10,600 recorded cases, including the Rohingya crisis in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea (UNHCR, 2025).
- **Western Asia:** Approximately 3,200 deaths, often linked to conflict-driven migration routes in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.
- **Europe (internal):** Nearly 1,400 cases, including fatalities on the Balkan route and within EU land borders (Cusumano, 2019).

Table 1. Recorded Migrant Deaths and Disappearances (2014–2025)

Region	Recorded Cases	Main Causes of Death
Mediterranean Sea	32,425	Drowning, shipwrecks
Africa	17,304	Dehydration, desert abandonment
America	11,267	Heat exposure, vehicle suffocation, drowning
Asia	10,651	Maritime incidents, trafficking abuse
Western Asia	3,222	Armed conflict, violence, unsafe crossings
Europe	1,396	Cold exposure, river crossings, pushbacks

Source: IOM, 2025

Global Overview of Migrant Deaths and Disappearances

Causes of Death and Disappearance

The majority of recorded deaths are linked to **drowning**, which accounts for nearly 60% of all cases worldwide (IOM, 2025). Other causes include:

- **Harsh environmental conditions:** extreme heat in deserts, hypothermia in mountainous and riverine crossings.
- **Violence and abuse:** killings by smugglers, armed groups, or during border enforcement operations.
- **Transport-related deaths:** suffocation in containers, trucks, or overcrowded boats (San Antonio, Texas, 2022).
- **Lack of medical care:** untreated illnesses and injuries during long journeys.

Data Gaps and Challenges

Despite progress in documentation, significant challenges remain:

- **Underreporting:** Many deaths occur in remote areas without official monitoring (Carling, 2017).
- **Identification difficulties:** Only a fraction of the deceased are identified, leaving families in perpetual uncertainty (Robins, 2019).
- **Political reluctance:** Some states are unwilling to share data due to political sensitivities or to avoid accountability (Cusumano & Villa, 2021).

The absence of reliable and transparent data not only obscures the scale of the crisis but also impedes the development of effective policy responses.

Regional Dynamics

The Mediterranean Sea

The Mediterranean remains the deadliest migration route in the world. Since 2014, more than 32,000 deaths and disappearances have been recorded in its waters (IOM, 2025). The Central Mediterranean corridor, stretching from Libya to Italy and Malta, accounts for nearly 25,000 of these cases. Overcrowded boats, lack of safety equipment, and delayed rescue operations have made this route especially lethal (Cusumano, 2019).

EU maritime missions, such as Operation Sophia and Operation Irini, have been criticized for prioritizing border control over humanitarian rescue (Moreno-Lax, 2020). Civil society organizations, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Sea-Watch, have conducted thousands of rescues but have faced increasing restrictions and criminalization (Cusumano & Villa, 2021). The 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck, which killed 368 migrants, remains a tragic symbol of this crisis.

Mediterranean region：（Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.）

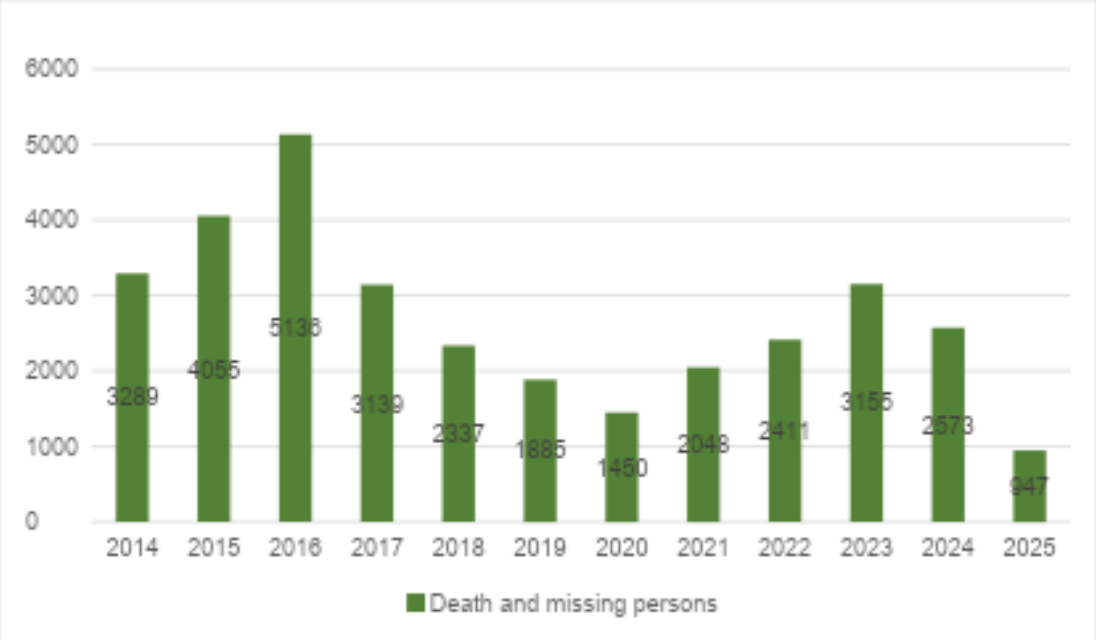


Figure 6. Mediterranean region：（Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.）

Regional Dynamics

Africa

Migration across Africa often involves crossing the Sahara Desert, one of the least monitored and most dangerous migration corridors. More than 17,000 migrant deaths and disappearances have been documented in Africa since 2014 (IOM, 2025). However, the true figure is likely much higher, as bodies are rarely recovered in the desert (McGregor, 2020).

Deaths are commonly caused by dehydration, vehicle breakdowns, abandonment by smugglers, and extreme temperatures exceeding 45°C. Migrants from West Africa heading toward Libya or Algeria face particular risks. In addition, conflicts in the Sahel region exacerbate the dangers by exposing migrants to armed groups and banditry (Molenaar & El Kamouni-Janssen, 2017).
The invisibility of Sahara deaths is one of the most serious gaps in the global migration debate. Unlike maritime disasters, desert fatalities often go unreported, leaving families without closure and policymakers without data.

African region：(Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.)

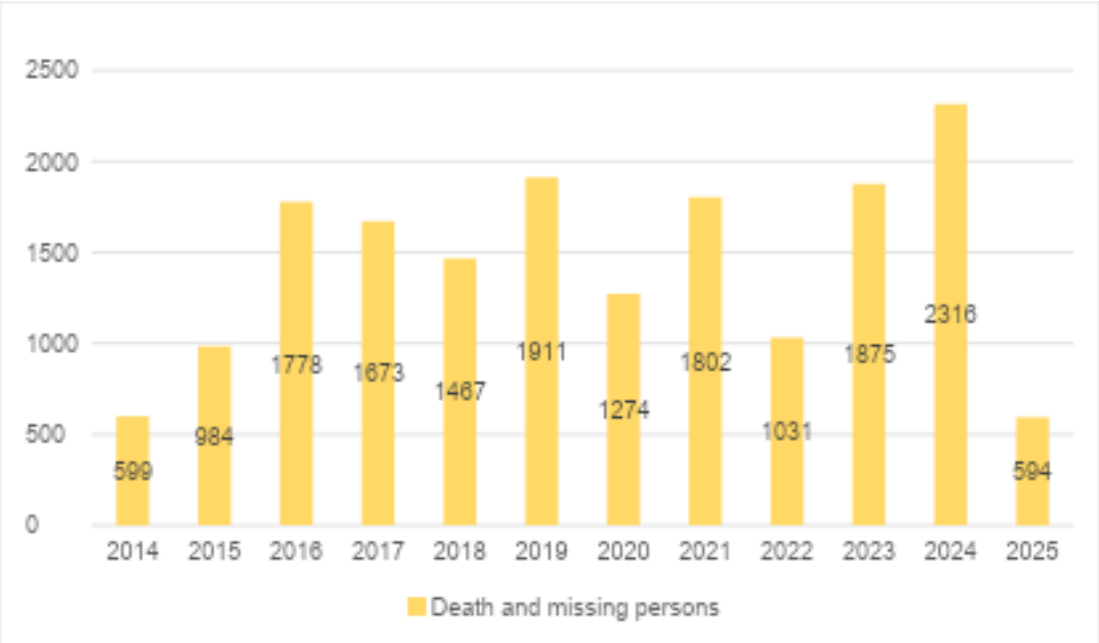


Figure 5. African region：(Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.)

Regional Dynamics

Asia

Asia has recorded at least 10,600 migrant deaths and disappearances since 2014 (IOM, 2025). The Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the most documented examples. Persecuted in Myanmar, tens of thousands of Rohingya have taken to the seas in fragile boats, hoping to reach Malaysia, Thailand, or Indonesia. In 2020, more than 2,400 Rohingya were stranded at sea for months, with hundreds dying from starvation and abuse (UNHCR, 2025).

South Asia also presents major risks along overland routes. Migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh often travel through Iran and Turkey toward Europe. Along the way, they face violence, accidents, and exploitation by smugglers (Majidi, 2017). Despite regional frameworks, cooperation among Asian states remains weak, resulting in repeated humanitarian crises.

Asian region：(Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.)

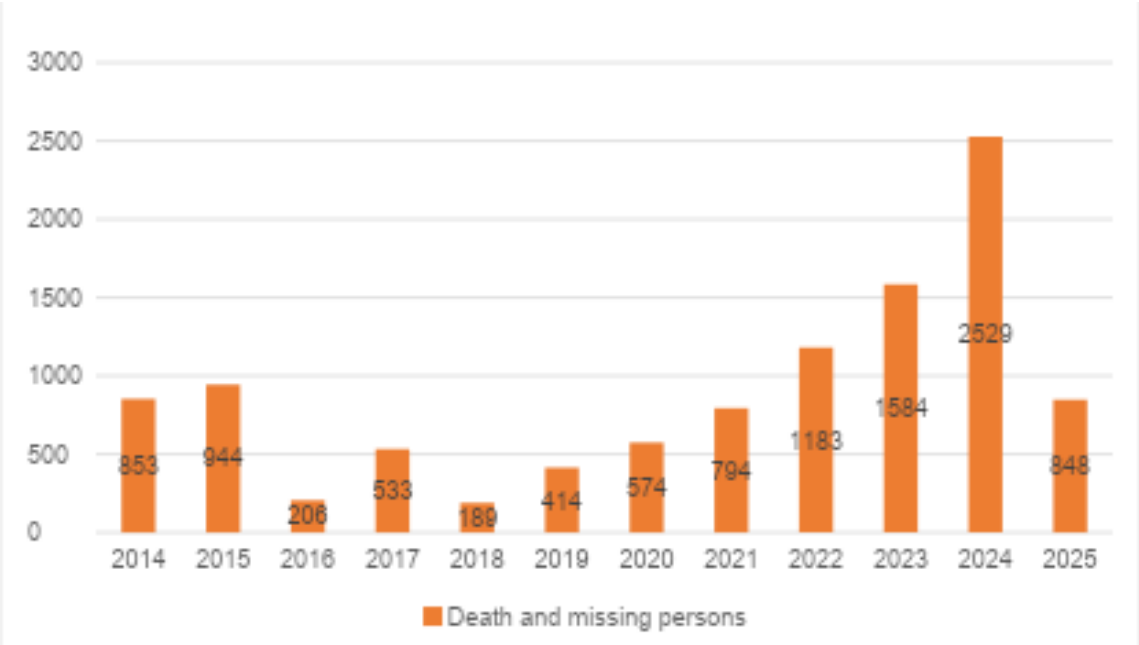


Figure 3. Asian region：(Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.)

Regional Dynamics

America

Migration across the Americas has become increasingly dangerous. Since 2014, more than 11,000 deaths and disappearances have been recorded (IOM, 2025). The U.S.–Mexico border is one of the most perilous crossings, with fatalities largely caused by heat exposure in deserts and drowning in the Rio Grande. In July 2022, 53 migrants were found dead inside an abandoned truck in San Antonio, Texas, highlighting the deadly consequences of irregular crossings and smuggling networks (HRW, 2022).

Central American migrants fleeing violence and poverty in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala often face kidnapping, extortion, and murder by criminal groups en route to Mexico and the United States (Martínez, 2018). Restrictive U.S. border policies have pushed migrants toward more dangerous routes, increasing risks rather than reducing flows.

American region：(Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.)

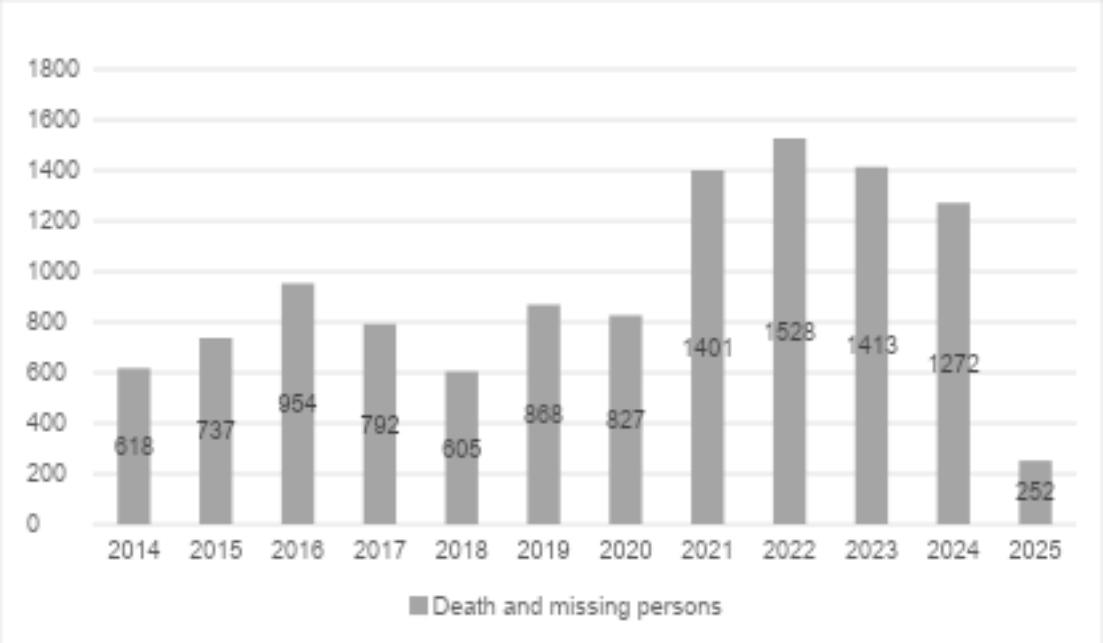


Figure 4. American region：(Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.)

Regional Dynamics

Europe (Internal Routes)

Within Europe, nearly 1,400 deaths and disappearances have been recorded since 2014 (IOM, 2025). Migrants traveling along the Balkan route, crossing rivers and mountains, are at risk of hypothermia, drowning, and violence at the hands of border guards (Amnesty International, 2019). Pushback practices, particularly in Croatia and Hungary, have been widely documented and condemned by human rights organizations.

Deaths in Europe often receive less attention compared to Mediterranean tragedies, yet they highlight the ongoing dangers of internal EU border enforcement and the lack of safe, legal pathways for asylum seekers.

European region：(Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.)

Figure 1. European region：(Data | Missing Migrants Project, n.d.)

These regional dynamics reveal both diversity and commonality. While contexts differ, the same underlying factors persist: restrictive migration policies, reliance on smugglers, lack of safe pathways, and inadequate state responses. The result is a global geography of risk where migrants' lives are routinely endangered and families are left in anguish.

Case Studies

The Lampedusa Shipwreck (Italy, 2013)

On October 3, 2013, a boat carrying over 500 migrants, mostly from Eritrea and Somalia, sank off the coast of Lampedusa, Italy. At least 368 people drowned, while fewer than 160 survived (European Parliament, 2013). Many of the deceased were never identified, leaving families in anguish and without closure.

The tragedy drew global attention and prompted moments of political reflection in Europe. However, subsequent EU operations such as Mare Nostrum were replaced with border-control–oriented missions that deprioritized humanitarian rescue (Cusumano, 2019). The Lampedusa case remains emblematic of the tension between humanitarian obligations and border security policies.

Policy lesson: Large-scale maritime tragedies underscore the necessity of sustained, state-led search and rescue (SAR) operations and cooperation between European and North African states.

Case Studies

The Rohingya Refugees at Sea (2014–2020)

Facing persecution and statelessness in Myanmar, tens of thousands of Rohingya attempted maritime journeys to Southeast Asia. Boats were often abandoned by smugglers, leaving passengers stranded for weeks or months without food or water.

In 2020 alone, at least 2,400 Rohingya were stranded at sea, and an estimated 427 perished (UNHCR, 2025). Survivors reported severe abuse, including beatings and sexual violence (Cheung, 2021).

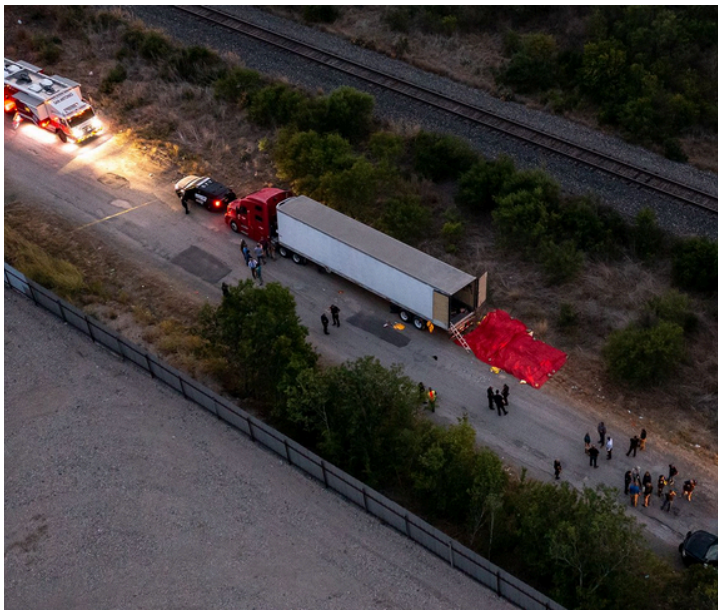
Regional responses were fragmented, with some states refusing disembarkation and leaving boats adrift. The lack of responsibility-sharing exposed gaps in international refugee protection regimes.

Policy lesson: Regional cooperation frameworks in Asia remain weak. A coordinated mechanism for disembarkation, rescue, and protection is urgently needed.

Case Studies

The San Antonio Truck Tragedy (USA, 2022)

On June 27, 2022, U.S. authorities discovered an abandoned tractor-trailer in San Antonio, Texas, containing 53 dead migrants, including children. The victims, mostly from Mexico and Central America, had been smuggled in extreme heat conditions without ventilation or water (Human Rights Watch, 2022).



This tragedy highlighted how restrictive U.S. border policies and enforcement measures push migrants into increasingly dangerous routes. Criminal smuggling networks exploit these vulnerabilities, often with lethal consequences.

Policy lesson: Border deterrence policies without safe alternatives increase reliance on smugglers. Expanding humanitarian visas, family reunification, and legal labor pathways is critical to reducing such deaths.

Case Studies

Deaths in the Sahara Desert

The Sahara is among the deadliest yet least documented migration routes. Since 2014, IOM has recorded more than 5,000 deaths in the desert, though the actual figure is likely far higher (McGregor, 2020).

Migrants often die from dehydration after vehicles break down, or they are abandoned by smugglers. Survivors recount harrowing experiences of walking for days in extreme heat with no food or water.

Bodies are rarely recovered, and families often never learn what happened to their loved ones. These “invisible deaths” receive little media coverage compared to maritime tragedies, yet they are no less devastating.

Policy lesson: Greater investment is needed in desert rescue infrastructure, cross-border data collection, and family tracing mechanisms.

Case Studies

The Pylos Shipwreck (Greece, 2023)

On June 14, 2023, a fishing trawler carrying more than 750 migrants capsized near Pylos, Greece. Only about 104 people survived, while an estimated 600 migrants drowned, making it one of the deadliest shipwrecks in Mediterranean history (BBC, 2023).

Eyewitness reports suggested that the boat had been in distress for hours before capsizing, raising questions about the adequacy and timeliness of the Greek coast guard's response.

The Pylos tragedy reignited debates about EU migration policies, pushbacks, and failures of the Common European Asylum System.

Policy lesson: The case highlights the urgent need for transparency in SAR operations and accountability mechanisms when state negligence contributes to loss of life.

These case studies illustrate recurring patterns across regions:

- Lack of safe and legal pathways forces migrants into hazardous journeys.
- Inadequate or delayed rescue operations cost lives.
- Families are left in limbo due to insufficient identification and information-sharing mechanisms.
- Restrictive migration policies exacerbate rather than mitigate risks.

Human Rights and Legal Dimensions

The crisis of missing and deceased migrants is not only a humanitarian tragedy but also a matter of binding international law. States have clear obligations under human rights, refugee, and humanitarian law to protect life, assist those in distress, and ensure families' right to know the fate of their relatives.

The Right to Life

The right to life is enshrined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) and Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966). These provisions oblige states to respect and protect the lives of all individuals under their jurisdiction, including migrants and refugees.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has repeatedly held that states have positive obligations to take operational measures to protect life when authorities know, or ought to know, of a real and immediate risk (ECtHR, Osman v. UK, 1998; Hirsi Jamaa v. Italy, 2012). This jurisprudence applies directly to maritime migration contexts, where delays or failures in search and rescue can constitute violations of the right to life.

Search and Rescue Obligations

International maritime law explicitly requires states to rescue persons in distress at sea. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982), Article 98, obliges states to render assistance to "any person found at sea in danger of being lost." Similarly, the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention, 1979) establishes frameworks for coordination.

Despite these obligations, many states have restricted SAR activities, delayed rescues, or criminalized NGOs engaged in humanitarian rescue (Cusumano & Villa, 2021). Such practices not only contravene international law but also increase the likelihood of preventable deaths.

Human Rights and Legal Dimensions

Families' Right to Know

Beyond the obligation to save lives, international humanitarian law recognizes the right of families to know the fate of their relatives. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, 2016) has affirmed that uncertainty about the fate of missing persons constitutes inhuman treatment. This principle applies to situations of armed conflict as well as migration contexts, where disappearances leave families in prolonged anguish.

Mechanisms for identification, repatriation of remains, and information-sharing are therefore not optional humanitarian gestures but obligations grounded in international law. States' failure to establish such mechanisms perpetuates violations of family rights.

Refugee and Asylum Protections

Many missing migrants are also refugees fleeing persecution, and thus fall under the protection of the 1951 Refugee Convention. The principle of non-refoulement, codified in Article 33, prohibits states from returning individuals to territories where their lives are at risk. Pushbacks at sea and at land borders, frequently documented in Europe, directly contravene this principle (Amnesty International, 2019).

Moreover, the Global Compact on Refugees (2018) commits states to responsibility-sharing, including measures to enhance safety along migration routes (UNHCR, 2018). The widespread deaths and disappearances of migrants indicate that these commitments remain largely unmet.

Human Rights and Legal Dimensions

Accountability and State Responsibility

International law provides avenues for accountability when states fail to protect migrant lives.

- Human rights courts and treaty bodies can hold states responsible for violations of the right to life.
- Regional courts, such as the ECtHR, have jurisdiction over cases of migrant deaths linked to pushbacks and negligent SAR operations (Hirsi Jamaa v. Italy, 2012).
- Domestic legal frameworks must also ensure that civil society actors engaged in rescue are protected rather than penalized.

Accountability is not only retrospective but preventive. Recognizing the deaths and disappearances of migrants as human rights violations shifts the focus from charity to legal duty.

The disappearance and death of migrants reveal a fundamental gap between international legal obligations and state practices. While law clearly mandates protection, implementation remains weak and selective. Bridging this gap requires stronger monitoring mechanisms, legal enforcement, and recognition of missing migrants as victims of human rights violations, not just humanitarian tragedies

Policy Gaps and Failures

Despite the scale of migrant deaths and disappearances, state and international responses remain fragmented, reactive, and inadequate. Several critical gaps and failures can be identified:

Inadequate Search and Rescue (SAR) Capacity

Although international law obliges states to render assistance to persons in distress at sea (UNCLOS, 1982; SAR Convention, 1979), state-led SAR operations have been scaled back in recent years. The EU's Operation Mare Nostrum (2013–2014), which rescued over 150,000 migrants, was discontinued and replaced by operations with narrower mandates focused on border control (Cusumano, 2019).

At the same time, NGOs conducting rescue missions face legal and political obstacles, including the seizure of vessels, criminal prosecution of crews, and denial of disembarkation rights (Cusumano & Villa, 2021). This shrinking of humanitarian space has directly contributed to higher death tolls in the Mediterranean.

Policy Gaps and Failures

Criminalization of Migration and Humanitarian Assistance

Across regions, migration management strategies have increasingly prioritized deterrence and enforcement rather than protection. Practices such as pushbacks at sea, detention, and violent border enforcement have been widely documented (Amnesty International, 2019).

Moreover, NGOs and individuals offering humanitarian aid—whether rescuing at sea or providing shelter on land—have been prosecuted under anti-smuggling laws, despite acting in line with international human rights principles (Fekete, 2018). This criminalization undermines civil society's role and erodes trust between migrants and authorities.

Data Deficiencies and Lack of Transparency

Accurate and reliable data on migrant deaths remains scarce. Many deaths in deserts, conflict zones, and remote areas go unreported. Even when bodies are recovered, identification is rare due to the absence of systematic data-sharing and forensic mechanisms (Brian & Laczko, 2016; Robins, 2019).

States often withhold or manipulate data for political reasons, fearing accountability or public backlash (Andersson, 2014). This lack of transparency obscures the true scale of the crisis and prevents informed policymaking.

Policy Gaps and Failures

Failure to Uphold Families' Right to Know

Thousands of families remain in limbo, with no official information about the fate of their loved ones. Despite recognition of the "right to know" under international humanitarian law (ICRC, 2016), most states have not established mechanisms for notification, tracing, or repatriation of remains. The absence of psychological, legal, and financial support compounds families' suffering, transforming a human tragedy into a structural injustice.

Restrictive Migration Policies and Lack of Safe Pathways

Efforts to deter migration—through stricter border controls, visa restrictions, and externalization policies—have not reduced the demand for movement. Instead, they have redirected migrants to more dangerous routes (De Haas, 2021). The lack of humanitarian visas, resettlement schemes, and labor mobility programs forces individuals into the hands of smugglers and traffickers.

Rather than addressing root causes such as conflict, poverty, and persecution, current policies prioritize short-term containment. This structural failure perpetuates a cycle where migration management itself becomes a driver of migrant deaths (Squire, 2020).

The persistence of migrant deaths is not due to inevitability, but to policy choices. Gaps in SAR, criminalization of aid, lack of data, denial of families' rights, and restrictive migration regimes collectively create conditions in which disappearances are normalized. To prevent further loss of life, these systemic failures must be acknowledged as violations of human rights and international obligations—not simply as humanitarian challenges.

Policy Recommendations

The persistence of migrant deaths and disappearances is not inevitable. It is the result of policy failures and lack of accountability. To address these systemic shortcomings, this report proposes five key areas of reform:

Strengthening Search and Rescue (SAR) Operations

- **State obligations:** Governments must fulfill their duties under UNCLOS (1982) and the SAR Convention (1979) to assist all persons in distress at sea.
- **Dedicated SAR units:** The EU and coastal states should restore and expand state-led SAR operations similar to Mare Nostrum, with a clear humanitarian mandate (Cusumano, 2019).
- **Protecting NGOs:** Civil society actors such as MSF, SOS Méditerranée, and Sea-Watch must be safeguarded from criminalization. Their lifesaving work should be recognized as complementary to state efforts (Cusumano & Villa, 2021).
- ·**Regional coordination:** Establish joint rescue coordination centers to avoid delays caused by jurisdictional disputes.

Policy Recommendations

Guaranteeing Families' Right to Know

- **Identification mechanisms:** Create cross-border forensic databases to identify remains, building on ICRC guidelines (ICRC, 2016; Brian & Laczko, 2016).
- **Family tracing services:** Provide accessible hotlines and consular services for families seeking information.
- **Psychosocial support:** Establish community-based programs to address the mental health impacts on families living with uncertainty (Robins, 2019).

Enhancing Data Collection and Transparency

- **Standardized reporting protocols:** Border guards, coast guards, and local authorities should use harmonized methods for recording deaths.
- **Public data-sharing**: Governments must cooperate with IOM's Missing Migrants Project and publish disaggregated statistics (IOM, 2025).
- **Independent monitoring:** An international mechanism should be created to verify and audit state reporting, ensuring transparency and accountability (Andersson, 2014).

Policy Recommendations

Expanding Safe and Legal Pathways

- **Humanitarian visas and resettlement:** States should introduce humanitarian admission programs and expand refugee resettlement quotas (UNHCR, 2018).
- **Labor mobility schemes:** Legal migration channels for work can reduce reliance on smugglers and risky routes (De Haas, 2021).
- **Family reunification:** Simplifying procedures for family reunification can prevent desperate journeys.
- **Community sponsorship:** Local communities should be empowered to host and support migrants through structured sponsorship programs.

Establishing an International Day of Remembrance

- **Recognition by the UN General Assembly:** Official designation of an International Day of Remembrance for Missing and Deceased Migrants.
- **Purpose:** Provide space for commemoration, raise global awareness, and honor families' right to know.
- **Accountability link:** Beyond symbolism, the observance should drive concrete commitments from states to reduce preventable deaths (IOM, 2023).

These recommendations are interlinked. Without safe pathways, SAR will remain overwhelmed. Without data transparency, accountability will remain elusive. Without recognition of families' rights, the crisis will continue to cause intergenerational harm. Only a holistic approach, grounded in human rights, can prevent further loss of life and restore dignity to migrants and their families.

Conclusion

The disappearance and death of migrants is not a natural inevitability, but a direct consequence of political choices, restrictive policies, and systemic neglect. Since 2014, at least **75,000** migrants have been recorded as missing or deceased worldwide, yet this figure underestimates the true scale of the crisis (IOM, 2025). Behind each statistic lies a human life cut short and a family condemned to uncertainty.

The regional dynamics analyzed in this report—from the shipwrecks of the Mediterranean, to the silent tragedies of the Sahara, to the suffocation of migrants at the U.S.–Mexico border—demonstrate that this is a **global crisis**. Despite contextual differences, common patterns emerge: unsafe journeys forced by a lack of legal alternatives, insufficient or delayed search-and-rescue operations, inadequate accountability mechanisms, and the systematic marginalization of families' rights to truth and justice.

International law is clear. The **right to life**, the **duty to rescue**, the **prohibition of refoulement**, and the **families' right to know** are not optional principles but binding obligations (UDHR, 1948; ICCPR, 1966; UNCLOS, 1982; ICRC, 2016). Yet state practice often diverges sharply from these commitments. When governments criminalize humanitarian assistance, withhold data, or prioritize deterrence over protection, they fail in their legal and moral duties.

The recommendations in this report provide a roadmap for change:

- Restoring and expanding search-and-rescue capacity;
- Guaranteeing families' right to know through identification and tracing mechanisms;
- Ensuring data transparency and independent monitoring;
- Expanding safe and legal migration pathways;
- Establishing an **International Day of Remembrance for Missing and Deceased Migrants** to honor victims and demand accountability.

Conclusion

This is not only a humanitarian agenda, but a **justice agenda**. Preventing migrant deaths requires shifting from treating disappearances as collateral damage of migration control to recognizing them as violations of fundamental human rights.

We close this report with a call:

- To **governments**, to uphold their obligations under international law;
- To the **United Nations**, to lead in recognizing the International Day of Remembrance;
- To **civil society and affected families**, to continue demanding dignity, truth, and justice.

Every migrant has a name. Every family has the right to know.

Remembrance must lead to accountability, and accountability must lead to change.

References

- Amnesty International. (2019). Pushed to the Edge: Violence and Abuse Against Refugees and Migrants Along the Balkans Route.
- Andersson, R. (2014). Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe. University of California Press.
- BBC. (2023). Greece migrant boat disaster: Hundreds feared dead off Pylos. BBC News.
- Brian, T., & Laczko, F. (Eds.). (2016). Fatal Journeys Volume 2: Identification and Tracing of Dead and Missing Migrants. International Organization for Migration.
- Carling, J. (2017). How Can the World Respond to the Migrant Crisis? Journal of Migration Studies, 5(3), 145–162.
- Cheung, S. (2021). Rohingya at Sea: Regional Responses and International Law. Asian Journal of International Law, 11(2), 312–335.
- Cusumano, E. (2019). Migrant Rescue as Organized Hypocrisy: EU Maritime Missions Offshore Libya between Humanitarianism and Border Control. Cooperation and Conflict, 54(1), 3–24.
- De Haas, H. (2021). A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework. Comparative Migration Studies, 9(1), 8.
- European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). (1998). Osman v. United Kingdom, Application no. 23452/94.
- European Parliament. (2013). Resolution of 23 October 2013 on the Lampedusa Tragedy.

References

- Fekete, L. (2018). Migrants, Borders and the Criminalisation of Solidarity in the EU. Race & Class, 59(4), 65–83.
- Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2022). US: Migrant Deaths in San Antonio a Wake-Up Call.
- International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). (2016). The Right to Know: Families of Missing Migrants. Geneva: ICRC.
- International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention). (1979). International Maritime Organization.
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). (1966). United Nations.
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2023). Remembrance and Advocacy Initiatives on Missing Migrants.
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2025). Missing Migrants Project. Retrieved from https://missingmigrants.iom.int
- Majidi, N. (2017). Afghan Migrants and Refugees: The Long Road to Europe. Migration Policy Institute.
- Martínez, O. (2018). The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail. Verso.
- McGregor, J. (2020). The Deadly Sahara: Migrant Deaths in the Desert. Migration Studies, 8(4), 567–584.

References

- Molenaar, F., & El Kamouni-Janssen, F. (2017). Turning the Tide: The Politics of Irregular Migration in the Sahel and Libya. Clingendael Institute.
- Moreno-Lax, V. (2020). The Architecture of Functional Jurisdiction: Unpacking Contactless Control. German Law Journal, 21(3), 385–416.
- Robins, S. (2019). Families of the Missing: A Test for Contemporary Approaches to Transitional Justice. Routledge.
- Squire, V. (2020). Europe's Migration Crisis: Border Deaths and Human Dignity. Cambridge University Press.
- United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). (1982). United Nations.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2018). Global Compact on Refugees.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2025). UN fears 427 Rohingya perished at sea in search of safe shelter.
- United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Acknowledgement

This report has been prepared by -

- Jingjin Luo - Research and data compilation
- MSc. Beyza Aytemur - Writer
- Mohammed Farhan Uddin - Design, formatting and structuring the report
- Dr. Zakira Hekmat - Editor

We would like to express our appreciation to all those who supported us in the preparation of this report. In particular, we thank ARSA Management for their guidance and cooperation, as well as all colleagues and stakeholders who contributed their time and insights.

Together, we look to bring in light the hard journey refugees often face during migrations and we expect to enhance our services to ease in such refugees.

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES SOLIDARITY ASSOCIATION

ARSA

FOR MORE INFORMATION

+90 352 222 54 81 +90 555 080 38 90

info@arsa.org.tr

www.arsa.org.tr

Sahabiye Mah. Ahmet Paşa Cad. NO: 24/A Kocasinan
Kayseri, Türkiye